

Gellner's Philosophy of History - Interpretations and Problems

Musil, Jiri

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Musil, J. (2001). Gellner's Philosophy of History - Interpretations and Problems. *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review*, 9(2), 153-172. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53534>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Gellner's Philosophy of History – Interpretations and Problems

JIRÍ MUSIL*

Central European University, Budapest, Warsaw,
Faculty of Science, Charles University, Prague

Abstract: The major part of Ernest Gellner's work ranks among the few contemporary attempts at a global theory of the development of mankind, or, in his words, 'the structure of human history'. Gellner's theory is based on two main assumptions: first, the succession of three radically and generically different types of societies: 1) hunter-gatherer society; 2) agrarian society; 3) industrial society; and second, the assumption that in all these societies it is necessary to distinguish three categories of human activity: 1) the economy; 2) power; 3) knowledge. In his last books he added a fourth component: culture and organisation. The possible variations of mutual relationships between the economy, power, and knowledge in each of the developmental phases is what forms the first part of Gellner's thoughts on the philosophy of history. The second, and perhaps more important part consists of his thoughts on the forms and causes behind the transition from agrarian to industrial society. The emergence of industrial society cannot be easily explained. Therefore Gellner prefers to speak only of the circumstances surrounding this development. They can be summarised in the following way: a restrained state, not interfering too much in the life of the people; Protestantism and its ethic and life style; a developing, if modest and not too robust technology. The mixture of these three circumstances created a situation out of which an industrial, contractual, pluralist, and open society emerged in Europe. In this article, the author challenges the interpretation of Gellner's theory as being a kind of non-Marxist historical materialism, and describes it rather as structural functionalism applied to history. At the same time, the author points to several problems that can be found in Gellner's sociological theory of history, and devotes the latter part of the paper to outlining four specific problem areas.

Czech Sociological Review, 2001, Vol. 9 (No. 2: 153-172)

In contemporary sociology and anthropology a distinction is made between two types of theories concerning the development of mankind: global theories and specific theories. Global theories attempt to explain change on an abstract level. They identify the factors of change, describe how changes come about, and predict their probable consequences. Specific theories of development deal with the changes that certain elements of mankind go through, or may deal with certain periods, and, if the theories aim beyond a mere description, they also apply one of the global concepts to their interpretation of specific social phenomena. For understandable reasons, specific theories are greater in number, and there are considerably fewer global concepts of the development of society.

The major part of Ernest Gellner's works rank among the few contemporary attempts at a global theory of the development of mankind. Several years ago a festschrift¹

*) Direct all correspondence to: Professor Jiří Musil, Faculty of Science, Charles University, Albertov 6, 128 43 Praha 2, e-mail ceu.musil@volny.cz

¹) This collection of papers under the title *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, the editors of which are John A. Hall and Ian Jarvie (1996), contains 33 papers, including an especially interesting paper by Ernest Gellner himself, entitled 'A Response to Critics'. In 7 sections the book deals with the intellectual background of Ernest Gellner, nationalism and nations, the models of devel-

was published in honour of what would have been his seventieth birthday, with written contributions from over thirty of his students and commentators, and this collection of papers clearly points to the main areas of Gellner's interests. The first area of interest was the philosophy of history, and an examination of the laws that govern the development of human society and the emergence of industrial society in particular. The second important area for Gellner included issues relating to the nation and nationalism, relativism and universalism in philosophy and in daily life, the emergence and the role of science, and Islam. In addition, he dealt with an entire series of other subjects such as, for example, segmentary societies, the conditions surrounding the emergence and development of a civil society, postmodernism, Freudism, and linguistics. His range of interests was exceptionally broad, but the subjects they revolved around tended in different variations to return to the one circle of interests that I believe formed his central subject: the need to understand what he referred to as 'the structure of human history'.

The following text is devoted mainly to this subject, but in its scope it will be able to touch upon just some of its selected areas. The text is based on knowledge of the complete works of Ernest Gellner, but especially on an interpretation and paraphrasing of his pivotal work *Plough, Sword and Book*,² which in my opinion provides the best synthesis of his thoughts on human history. The paper also draws on other of his works, namely: *Thought and Change*,³ *Reason and Culture*,⁴ *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*,⁵ *State and Society in Soviet Thought*,⁶ and, published posthumously, the books *Nationalism*⁷ and *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*.⁸

opment of society, Islam, science and the disenchantment of the world, relativism and universals, and the philosophy of history. It also contains the most complete bibliography of Gellner's works.

2) The first edition of the book was published in London in 1988. In this article I am citing from the 1991 edition [see Gellner 1991].

3) Gellner's book *Thought and Change* was published in 1964, and it is characteristic of him that he dedicated it to Bertrand Russell! It should be pointed out that the Introduction to Gellner's first book *Words and Things* [1959] was written by Russell, who expressed full agreement with Gellner's criticism of the at that time very powerful Oxford linguistic philosophy.

4) The book *Reason and Culture* was published in Oxford in 1992 and was translated also into Czech by the Centre for the Study of Democracy and Culture in Brno and published as *Rozum a kultura* in 1999.

5) *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*, published in 1973 by I. C. Jarvie and Joseph Agassi, is a collection of epistemological and methodological studies focusing primarily on social anthropology. It includes an important paper on the mutual relationship between sociology and social anthropology.

6) Ernest Gellner inherited his great interest in Russia and the Soviet Union from his father. This led to his frequent visits to the Soviet Union. But he also maintained a deep intellectual interest in the work of Soviet ethnographers and anthropologists and in the relationship between Marxism as an official ideology and Marxism as an analytic tool. In a number of papers published in the book *State and Society in Soviet Thought*, published in 1988, Gellner deals with the Marxist theory of society.

7) The first posthumously published book of E. Gellner, which his son David Gellner – also a social anthropologist – prepared for publication, was *Nationalism* in 1997. In this publication Gellner expresses concisely and briefly his opinions on the issues of the nation and nationalism in the context of society-wide development. In it, he reacted to the development of Europe and the world after 1989.

The conclusion of the paper is then devoted to a short critical evaluation of Gellner's philosophy of history.

Basic conceptual starting points

In Gellner's view, one of the great paradoxes of our age is the fact that, although it is an age in which deep social and intellectual changes are occurring and in which everything is in motion, thought in this age has remained primarily unhistorical or anti-historical [Gellner 1991: 12]. Historicism has "become a term of abuse" [ibid.].

One reason for this is found in what is referred to as the 'genetic fallacy'. This fallacy is essentially the assumption that the origin, rise and validity of any thought are realities that are independent of one another. In the introductory chapter of *Plough, Sword and Book*, Gellner responds to this in the following way: "Our opinion here is that we look at (...) roots in order to understand our options, not so as to prejudge our choices." [ibid.: 12]

In the introductory chapter of *Plough, Sword and Book*, entitled 'The Need for Philosophic History', Gellner explains the aim behind his effort to understand 'the structure of human history'. In the effort to summarise the results of his life-long reflections on the structure and development of human society, Gellner attributed the philosophy of history with playing a key role. "It is to spell out, in the sharpest and perhaps exaggerated outline, a vision of human history which has in any case been assuming shape of late, but which has not yet been properly codified. The attempt to bring it to the surface is not made because the author has any illusions about knowing this vision to be true: he does not. Definite and final truth is not granted to theories in general. (...) The vision is formulated in the hope that its clear and forceful statement will make possible its critical examination." [ibid.: 12-13]

His opinions on scientific method, which resembled in their rationalism the views held by Karl Popper, complied with his rejection of attempts at an inductive, descriptive approach to the construction of the philosophy of human history. Instead, in his own words: "...one chooses the crucial and elementary factors operative in human history, selected to the best of one's judgement, and then works out their joint implications. If the resulting picture fits the available record and highlights the relevant questions, well and good. If not, further tinkering with the premises is evidently required. The method is in principle very simple; its implementation is not." [ibid.: 13]

In what way does this approach differ from models in any other scientific field? According to Gellner, in this case there exists something that is specific to the historical perspective: sequence, or succession. This approach adds a fundamental element to the general concept of scientific models: the emphasis on the knowledge of facts recorded in history, and not merely on a logical modelling of statically interpreted relationships between elements in some system. The rise of agriculture, political centralisation, the division of labour, literacy, science, intellectual liberalisation, all of this happened in a certain historical succession, and in Gellner's view this happens because some phenomena in the history of mankind necessarily require the existence of other phenomena that emerge

⁸⁾ *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* is the second book that was published after the death of E. Gellner. It came out in 1998 and was meticulously prepared for publication by David Gellner.

prior to them and which they are unable to precede. Gellner also asserts – and this I believe is an important reminder of a well-known but often overlooked fact – that certain changes are irreversible: the rise of agriculture, the centralisation of society, the spread of literacy, and science; under certain circumstances these may vanish from areas in which they have once existed, but on the whole it is possible to assume that a certain kind of general cumulateness exists, i.e. that certain civilisational and cultural realities form a sort of ‘layer’ of skills, rules, knowledge, and technology, which is never lost, but instead accumulates into continually more complex and also more effective cultural patterns.

That this principle of cumulateness applies in human history, or in other words, that one kind of change is possible only on the basis of another, prior change, is something that evokes a parallel with evolutionary biology. In history, movement is of course transmitted by culture, that is, through acquired signs, and these are not transmitted genetically. In Gellner’s view, it is possible to loosely define culture as a system of concepts or ideas which drives human thought and behaviour. Human history in the real sense of the word was born in a situation in which the genetic equipment of man became permissive enough to allow for the emergence of heterogeneous forms of social behaviour. In other words – and this is my own interpretation – as the genetic equipment of man became so indeterminate, mechanisms for regulating human behaviour other than just biological ones had to arise – and culture, language and concepts emerged. According to Gellner, this was absolutely necessary, and even if the social heterogeneity of mankind was and is tremendous, at the beginning of human history, within individual communities an internal socio-cultural order had to emerge, as small human communities could not have survived if they had only internally heterogeneous concepts and language, and heterogeneous rules of relationships between its members.

Gellner was however fully aware that the progression of human society is not dependent only on culture, but rather on much more simple and hard material realities; he literally said that it depends on physical power, on the economy, and on the threat of hunger. The relationship between the cognitive, ideological and material causes of historical changes is what divides historical idealists from materialists. It is important not to underestimate these ‘hard’ realities. The very title of the work in which he most completely summarised his opinion on human history was intended to express his historical pluralism: the plow represents agriculture, the sword represents power, and the book, knowledge. Human history in his interpretation can be understood as a re-grouping of relationships between these three basic structural elements of all societies. It should be added that these relationships were always specific within the individual phases of human history – they changed.

It is interesting to note that Gellner is referred to with relative frequency as an original historical materialist, or even a Marxist, and some authors have called him an historical idealist. But he was always difficult to classify. This was also true with respect to his political position. In ‘A Response to Critics’,⁹ included in the above-mentioned festschrift, he says: “I am exceedingly proud of a remark once made about me behind my

⁹) The last section of the collection, entitled *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, published in 1996 by former students of E. Gellner, John Hall and Ian Jarvie, is the chapter titled ‘A Response to Critics’. In it, Gellner responds to all the main critical objections to his opinions. The structure of this festschrift manages to entirely escape the usually celebratory format of Central European collections of this kind.

back by David Glass: 'When the Revolution comes, both sides will shoot *him*.'" [Hall and Jarvie 1996: 673]

But here he explains his position in his own words: "My relationship to Marxism has at all times been critical: it has only influenced me so to speak by reaction. I am a mild socialist in the sense that I consider the generalized market to be a bad model (prescriptively and descriptively), though at the same time I hold the absence of central control over production and trade to be a precondition of liberty; in other words, I believe in a mixed economy. In an advanced and partly atomized society, I hold an effective welfare state to be both a moral imperative, and a precondition of a stable order. Passionate and messianic socialism, which sees the pervasive abolition of private control over resources as the big divide between good and evil, and hence as permitting any means in overcoming its inherently evil opponents, is, demonstrably, the biggest enemy of freedom in industrial society." [ibid.: 671] In the conclusion of this paper we will return to the subject of his relationship to historical materialism and Marxism.

That he was so frequently considered a materialist in his interpretation of history stems among other things from his division of history into three stages: Gellner distinguished between three radically and generically different societies: 1. hunter-gatherer society; 2. agrarian society; 3. industrial society. He spoke of these as 'fundamentally different types'. Gellner vehemently refuted the assertion that this is a matter of historical or economic determinism. The economic or production base does in his opinion determine our problems, but – and this is important – it does not determine our solutions. Empirical data demonstrate that all three types of societies have extremely heterogeneous, distinct forms.

Gellner combined the division of the development of society into three developmental stages with a division of human activity into three basic categories, which he considered to be: 1. the economy; 2. power; 3. knowledge. One of the books that was published after his death shows that he later added a further distinction: culture and organisation.¹⁰ This was important in his account of the rise of nationalism and the nation. The possible variations of mutual relationships between the economy, power and knowledge in each of the developmental stages forms the first part of Gellner's thoughts on the philosophy of history. The second, and perhaps more important part consists of his thoughts on the forms of the causes behind the transition from one developmental stage to the next. It may be said without a doubt that he was most attracted, we could say even fascinated, by the question of the birth of the third stage, i.e. what in the beginning he referred to simply as industrial society, and later as scientific-industrial society.

The concept of the structure of human history

I will now attempt to summarise the content of Gellner's concept of the structure of human history. The book *Nationalism*, published posthumously, is an aid in this effort, as it contains the chapters 'A Short History of Mankind' and 'The Industrial and Industrialis-

¹⁰) Gellner considered culture and organisation to be the two general components in all human societies. In his opinion these are the 'raw materials' of all social life. By the term social organisation he means the internal differentiation of society and actually any social group. The significance he ascribed to these terms stems from the fact that he considered nationalism to be a political principle, which assumes that the similarity of culture is the basic social bond, the basic element of social organisation [see Gellner 1997: 3 and 5-13].

ing World', in which Gellner presents his opinion in its most concise form [Gellner 1997: 14-24 and 25-30].

Since Gellner was drawn most to the questions surrounding the emergence of industrial society, all his work pays some attention to what preceded this form of society, and then to industrial society itself. What then are the features of an agrarian society, or what he referred to as 'ruritanian' or 'agraria'?

Thanks to developments in the area of the food production and storage, in comparison with hunter-gatherer societies agraria is characterised by a rapid growth in population. The growth in the number of inhabitants stimulated an increase in the division of labour and led to greater complexity in the social organisation. It saw the rise of the Red and the Black, i.e. the specialists in power and government, and the masters of ritual and doctrine, connected with the transcendental, and the emergence of political centralisation, or in other words, the state and a hierarchical organisation of society. Complexity and hierarchy developed in tandem. In Gellner's view, these societies were also characterised by technological stability or slow technical progress. In these circumstances the only possible way to increase the production of food was through an increase in the area of cultivated land or a growth in the number of people. This kind of situation had its limits as far as production is concerned, but not as far as the growth in the number of inhabitants is concerned. For this reason Gellner referred to these societies as Malthusian – even inherently Malthusian, that is, under the continual threat of hunger. In these societies famines did occur with unavoidable frequency, though hunger did not strike people randomly but rather selectively, i.e. according to social position. In these Malthusian conditions the fate of the individual was determined by social position, category, and privilege. In agraria, power determines wealth, and not wealth power. But the large role power occupies in agraria requires social cohesion and stability, and for this reason, knowledge in such societies is primarily aimed at the maintenance of order and stability.

The representative *par excellence* of the social theory of agrarian society is Plato. Gellner says of him in *Plough, Sword and Book*: "Plato codified and tried to absolutize an arrangement which is in fact the commonest, most pervasive way of running an agro-literate society. It is a blueprint of a society endowed with agriculture, arts and crafts, with a surplus which needs to be guarded, with writing, and with a fairly stable, or in any case not visibly expanding, technological base." [Gellner 1991: 85]

Elsewhere in the same book Gellner makes a general summary of the differences between the concept of knowledge and what he called truth in agricultural and scientific-industrial societies. This is one example of the original thought of E. Gellner and for this reason it is worth quoting him directly: "Truth is for it the fulfilment of an ideal, which in turn is moulded by complex and plural concerns. This is wholly different from truth as satisfaction of the simple, isolated requirement, such as the collating and predicting of facts. The truth of agro-literate society is essentially different from the truth of scientific-industrial society." [Ibid.: 276] The primary functions of culture in agrarian societies is to strengthen stability, the agrarian society "...values stability, and generally conceives the world and its own social order as basically stable. Some agrarian social forms at least seem to be deliberately organized so as to avoid the dangers of possibly disruptive innovations." [Ibid.: 17] According to Gellner the aim of intellectual activities in agrarian societies was therefore to stabilise and cement the societies, establish loyalty and secure their values. In industrial, modernised societies, knowledge has a different function. It

becomes above all an instrument for dealing with specific issues and a means for discovering what is as yet unknown. Knowledge and science cease to be the stabilisers of society. Durkheimian generic rationality, aimed at maintaining general rules, changes into what may be referred to as Weberian rationality, that is, partial and instrumental rationality, where the means essential for achieving clearly set aims are what is sought above all.

Before we begin to examine how European society extricated itself from the agrarian model it is first necessary to make a sketch of Gellner's picture of industrial society. This picture is based on a view he expressed in *Nationalism*.¹¹ Again we must limit ourselves to only the main features and then turn to his most difficult question: how and why did it happen.

1. Industrial society differs from agrarian above all in that it is founded on *growth* of the economy and science and not on a stable economy or technology. The growth of the economy is faster than the growth of the population – in other words, this society is no longer Malthusian. At the same time the production of food in these societies is the concern of a continuously smaller number of people.
2. Economic growth is connected with increasing social mobility. Unlike development thus far, in the course of which societies became more unequal, these societies were more complex, and the formation of industrial society initiated a trend towards increasingly egalitarian conditions. In this connection Gellner cites de Tocqueville with approval – he as is known considered the trend towards greater equality as one of the great progresses in Europe since the end of the Middle Ages [Gellner 1997: 26].
3. Also, Gellner repeatedly emphasises that we are ever more equal because we have become more mobile, and not the other way around.
4. Rapidly changing technology means that the structure of professions also changes quickly. Industrial society can therefore not be linked to a system of castes or estates.
5. The social structure of these societies must at least to a certain degree be meritocratic.
6. Innovation and meritocracy necessarily lead to the substitution of a rigidly stratified society with a formally egalitarian society. Modern societies are not obviously egalitarian in the sense that large differences in terms of power or wealth are unable to exist in them. They are egalitarian in the sense that the differences between particular strata are ordered in the form of a certain continuity, so that no formal line of division, expressed by legal norms, ritual or custom, actually exists. The differences in these societies are graded and continual [ibid.: 28].
7. The mobility and anonymity of modern societies is their most marked feature.
8. The semantic character of work dominates, and physical labour is increasingly substituted with intellectual work, and this supposes a relatively long period of preparation, i.e. learning.
9. In industrial societies, the significance of non-contextual and universal culture increases.
10. A part of the metamorphosis which transformed agrarian society into an industrial one is not just the new economy, social structure, and a change in the employment of

¹¹) The description of the features of industrial societies is taken from Chapter 4 of *Nationalism* [Gellner 1997: 25-30].

power, but rather also the nature of social cohesion. The way of thinking of course also changes, and the role of knowledge increases very quickly.

Simple agricultural societies are characterised by a higher level of social cohesion. The world people live, think, and act in is the same world. The cognitive and moral orders mutually reinforce and maintain each other. Within the scope of his thoughts on these relationships Gellner formulated what he said to be an important though somewhat rough law on the intellectual history of humanity. Logical and social coherence are in a contradictory relationship: the more you have of one, the less you have of the other. And this is actually another way of expressing Weber's theory of the process of rationalisation as an essential component of industrial capitalist societies.

The rationalisation of the world leads to what Max Weber referred to as the 'elimination of magic from the world' – and Gellner accepted this view fully. A rational, scientific-industrial world is cold, less cosy, impersonal, and disconnected – estranged and anomic. Gellner agrees with Weber and adds his own words on the effects of 'Reason'. In the *Legitimation of Belief* he writes: "Reason does not produce another, and a rival, total and closed picture, as gratifying for man as the old theological ones (or more so) only upside down. It produces none at all. On the contrary, it merely erodes the old one." [Gellner 1974: 194] The openness of this society and its fate are givens in that logical consistence and openness are acquired at the price of social and moral inconsistency. We will see, however, that towards the end of his life, in my opinion, Gellner somewhat altered his view on this matter.

Gellner moreover believed that this type of rationalistic and open society in history is something exceptional and with no historical guarantees. This modern society – and for Gellner that means at the same time the open, contractual and liberal society – is ephemeral and can in his view vanish; there is nothing certain about it.

The deep awareness of the uncertainty and the precariousness of the open, and in the true sense of the word, liberal society – and in this Gellner agrees with Max Weber – must have also had deep philosophical consequences. This point can be found in Gellner's book *Reason and Culture*, published in 1992, where in the chapter entitled 'Ailments of Reason', Gellner contemplates the consequences of this information, that the society he has such an affinity for and with which he himself agrees is altogether an uncertain, non-self-evident historical phenomenon.¹² In the above-mentioned chapter he reflects on those philosophers who are convinced that in human history, as in nature, in the end reason must prevail. This is the optimistic idea of the increasing presence of rationality in nature and in human history. It can take the form of Hegelian growth of rationality, but also the form of thought adopted by pragmatics. Gellner refers summarily to both of these categories of thinkers as 'Providentialists', as those who believe in providence asserting itself in history: "Providentialists in effect claim that the circularity does not matter: the world is such a blessed place that their own particular circle contains the truth." [Gellner 1992: 101]

Standing opposed to the Providentialists are the Rationalists: "So we can distinguish between Providentialists, who believe in a Pre-established Harmony, and their opponents, who might be called Rationalists with a Siege Mentality. (...) The latter do not

¹²) Chapter 5 is among the most interesting chapters, because it explains how in European thought rationalism gradually transformed into irrationalism [Gellner 1992: 97-111].

allow themselves to be reassured by the complacent assumption of a pervasively benign world, which will look after us, at least at the end, or in some versions, all along the way. The Siege Mentality assumes a world which is generally alien and hostile, or at best is neutral and totally unpredictable, and in which we cannot expect any cosmic underwriting and guarantee for our commitment to reason. For my own part, I happen to believe the Siege Mentality is correct.” [Ibid.: 101-102]

If then the modern industrial and open society, which at times is referred to as the liberal society, is something so non-self-evident and essentially fragile, it is important to examine how it actually established itself, how it was possible for it to emerge at all, and how it will be able to survive in the future. In other words, the foremost question is in what way it was possible for it to ‘escape’ from the carapace of stable, relatively closed, agrarian societies. For this reason Gellner refers to this change as the ‘exit’.

The problem of the exit

In reference to this problem, Gellner speaks of a miracle; it isn’t clear to him how industrial society could have emerged, and he doesn’t know how to solve this question. And he believes that the transformation of agrarian society into an industrial one is something that will probably remain a mystery for good. He stresses that in looking at this transformation it is necessary to distinguish between the Hegelian and the Weberian approaches. He unambiguously embraces Weber’s approach, which does not allow for the idea of any ‘historical necessity’ lying behind the emergence of modern society. Instead it lays emphasis on the uniqueness of the European constellation of cultural, economic and power circumstances that opened the gate to this direction of development.

The emergence of the scientific-industrial society cannot therefore be easily explained. Thus Gellner prefers to speak only of the circumstances surrounding this development, despite the danger of some eclecticism. Gellner somewhat surprisingly lodged his thoughts on the so-called conditions of the exit from agrarian society in the section of *Plough, Sword and Book* that focuses on questions of power.¹³ That he includes them in the section dealing with questions of power perhaps suggests that it was the changes occurring in this sphere that he considered as holding the key to revealing why this change occurred in Europe alone. Even if it is not clear why Gellner explains the emergence of industrial society in this very section of his works, his list of the ‘conditions of exit’ deserves our attention. It includes the following thirteen points:

1. *Feudalism as the matrix of capitalism.* Gellner claims that within European feudalism, which was governed by position and not by contract, there emerged something he refers to as ‘a curious free market in loyalty’ [Gellner 1991: 158]. Land was rented in exchange for a promise of loyal service. This model of contractual and binding relationship set an important precedent. Within feudalism there also emerged centres of business and trade existing under the protection of local or central rulers. Here there

¹³) Gellner always stressed that the emergence of modern European societies was the result of an entire series of still not entirely clear circumstances. Sometimes he used the term ‘chance’ for this transformation, and elsewhere, even ‘miracle’. In any case, he was among those authors who assumed that the exit from a stagnating agrarian society was the result of a constellation of a large number of causes. He presents a list of these causes on pp. 154-171 in *Plough, Sword and Book* [Gellner 1991).

emerged an important, autonomous sphere – the town. Gellner frequently emphasises the importance of towns in the process of forming a modern liberal society.

2. *Dualism of the state and the church.* During the process of the feudal dispersion of power a dual system was created, in which the secular and the spiritual powers divided up power over various components of society. This balance of power, which continually changed, made room for the freer position of some members of society.
3. *A restrained and restricted state.* For various reasons the successful, centralising state that ensued after the period of feudal dispersion was aimed rather at maintaining its rights than at political confiscation. Gellner claims that this was perhaps owing to the survival of the tradition of Roman law.
4. *Restrained and non-revolutionary town dwellers.* The new town dwellers, who were guided by the Protestant ethic, not only ploughed back¹⁴ the profits, they were also lacking in any inclination to make overt demonstrations of their wealth, prestige, and even power. This bourgeoisie, and especially the English bourgeoisie, was not revolutionary in nature, and thus it enabled the old powers to grow accustomed to them.
5. *The possibility of penetrating the aristocracy.* Although the theory about the openness of the English nobility is today questioned, and though it was never as great in the past as we thought, there is no doubt that it was never an entirely closed caste or estate. Instead, it is possible to find evidence of alignments with the new wealth, which had nothing to do with the land, but were rather the consequence of business and production.
6. *The existence of a growing amount of financial resources that could be used for collective bribery.*¹⁵ In the first phases of its existence, the new order, oriented towards industry and business, had to bribe the old power in order to satisfy the latter's representatives. In the later phases it had to make pay-offs in a downward direction instead, in order to satisfy the new urban poor. They could only do this of course if the overall economic resources of industrial societies were growing rapidly.
7. *A growing degree of technical innovation.* Only in the circumstances of strong economic efficiency, which among other things was conditional upon technological progress, was the new industrial society capable of accumulating the necessary resources for bribing different strata.
8. *The existence of free peasants.* In decisive areas of north-west Europe, where there emerged an individualistic economy-oriented society, considerably free and individualistic peasants had lived for a long time. According to a number of analyses they retained their independence for centuries.¹⁶
9. *The beginnings of individualism through the church and the religious sources of individualism.* Gellner links the emergence of European individualism also with developments within Christianity. In his view, the first step in this direction was the emergence

¹⁴) The term 'plough back the profits' refers to the deferment of consumption among English Puritans.

¹⁵) Collective corruption as a condition for the emergence of capitalism is one of Gellner's original hypotheses on the paths of exit from ruritania [see Gellner 1991: 160-161].

¹⁶) The opinion of Gellner expressed in this point was probably inspired by the book of his Cambridge colleague, Alan Macfarlane: *The Origins of English Individualism* [1978]. [Gellner 1991: 162-164].

of cloister communities, which with the help of modern vocabulary he characterised as the 'first dissidents out of society' [Gellner 1991: 165]. The second step is the Reformation, and the third is then the situation in which each person is his own priest, or in which 'anyone can be a dissident'. This is the last stage of development: no supervision and no restriction on individualism. He then added the paradoxical impact of the institution of celibacy. This restriction of clerics was primarily intended to strengthen economic and other powers of the Catholic Church, but its consequences also led to the emergence of an individualistic society.

10. *The Protestant ethic*. Gellner in essence agrees with Weber's theory of the role of Puritanism and Calvinism in the process of forming European capitalism. He stresses that the economic miracle of Europe is more of a political event than an economic one. Calvinism placed emphasis on order in the world, and its representatives were motivated by this opinion to rationally connect means with aims.
11. *A pluralist system of states*. The fragmentation of Europe into a large number of independent and at the same time well-functioning states undoubtedly had serious consequences. Among other reasons because it enabled enterprising minorities to move to regions in which they could develop their talents and energy.
12. *The internal and external balance of power*. The fragmented composition of Europe and the internal balance of powers between competing social groups within individual states led to what may be called a pluralist compromise.
13. *National rather than civic bourgeoisie*. When the first business-oriented, participatory, non-centralised islands of open societies surfaced they usually took the form of city-states. But these were unable to become a strong foundation for robust liberal societies, and it was rather the stabilised nation-states that did.

One of the critics of Gellner's work included in the above-mentioned collection, Alan MacFarlane, summarised his theory of the conditions of exit into three main points. Industrial, modern and open societies emerged as a result of the fact that the following phenomena combined themselves: 1. A restrained state not interfering too much in the life of the people; 2. Protestantism and its ethic and life style; 3. A developing, if modest and not too robust technology. The mixture of these three circumstances created a situation out of which an industrial, contractual, pluralist, and open society emerged in Europe.¹⁷

The problems of a Marxist interpretation of history

According to the Estonian author Andrus Park, Gellner's theory of history may be interpreted as an example of 'non-Marxist historical materialism' [Park 1996]. I believe that in reality it is somewhat more complicated, even though a part of Park's opinion has a rational basis, and this relates especially to the sympathy E. Gellner had for certain forms of materialism. It is however necessary in the first place to emphasise the fact that in his judgement: "Marxism is the major sociological theory to have emerged in the nineteenth century. Its standing is confirmed by the fact that such a large proportion of non-Marxist social thinkers continue to define their positions by reference to it."¹⁸ In practically all

¹⁷) Alan MacFarlane [1996], summarises the conditions of the exit from ruritania into the three points mentioned here.

¹⁸) These are Gellner's own words taken from the book *State and Society in Soviet Thought* [1988: 176].

Gellner's books he dealt with Marxism in one way or another. Behind this interest of course was more than just an academic motive to understand one of the attempts at a general explanation of social change. Of much greater significance was the fact that in his view this was a theory that was also an ethical and political philosophy, 'a promise of the collective salvation of mankind, of its deliverance from exploitation and oppression' [Gellner 1988: 176], which became the official ideology of an entire block of countries and had, and in some parts of the world still has, the role of determining how the life of society is to be arranged.

Among the relatively early, and somewhat forgotten texts by Gellner that dealt systematically with Marxism is the paper presented at the International Sociological Congress in Evian in 1966 entitled 'Sociology and Social Anthropology'. In this lecture, in which he explicitly expressed his sympathy for the method of structural functionalism – and in which he explained the points of agreement and difference in the thought and methods of sociologists and anthropologists and defined basic concepts such as structure and function – an important part is devoted to thoughts on the idealist and materialist account of causal relationships in society. Here I will only present a more concise version of Gellner's reflections.¹⁹ Causal relationships in society may be founded on a nexus formed by either nature or culture. The social system is then as a unit the common product of natural and cultural bonds (connections), whereby the soundness or infallibility of these cultural bonds is a co-product of the entire system. In this unqualified form, such an approach to the analysis of society can in his opinion be referred to as being idealist, and at the same time flawed. It includes excessive emphasis on two points: first, the power of concepts and ideas to direct the behaviour of people, and second, the length of time throughout which people can let themselves be directed by certain concepts and ideas.

On the other hand, the materialist approach assumes that social causality is very similar to causality in the material world and the most important relationships in society are of a nature similar to physical or biological relationships. Even this simplified version of course allows for the existence of 'ideology' or 'culture', which are also affected by material conditions. The reverse influence of these ideological factors is, however, in Gellner's view relatively weak. In later publications he changed his position on this.

In the above-mentioned paper presented at Evian, Gellner stressed that the structurally functional method does not allow for either one of these extreme positions, even though the materialist interpretation of social bonds is closer to it. He was however also fully aware of the argument of the idealist interpretation, which had not yet been dispensed with. This argument is founded on the point that in social, semantic, psychological and other systems, the context is provided by the system as a whole, a fundamental and inherent component. 'Meanings', which play an important role in every communicating human society, form an integral part of it. The anthropological concept of structure in his opinion incorporates both these sides, i.e. both the material link and causality, and the non-material, semantic link. He defined this form of materialism as 'multiform materialism', which he explicitly set against historical materialism. Even then, and it may be claimed that this was the result of studying Max Weber, he counted primarily the social organisation and the forms of power among the hard material factors that affect the de-

¹⁹) The Evian lecture printed in a collection of lectures presented at the 6th International Sociological Congress in [Gellner 1973: 107-137].

velopment of society. In his view these were more significant than Marx's economic base. Any good anthropological research of a community must therefore in his opinion always incorporate what he referred to as the 'Power Balance-Sheet', which is the demonstration of how a political or economic system is the result of the interplay of the forces that are in effect in the given situation.

In Gellner's later works the critical examinations of Marxism increased. They dealt particularly with the political and economic aspects of its application, but also with Marxism as an analytic tool. Here I will mention only the objections that appeared repeatedly in his texts.

In the concluding chapter of *State and Society in Soviet Thought* [ibid.: 176-181] he makes a very succinct summary of his opinions on some aspects of historical materialism. The materialist concept of history in Gellner's view was born as a reaction to Hegel's opinion that concepts and abstractions are the hidden forces that shape human history. The rival opinion of Marx, wherein the determinants of history are concrete people, the concrete activities of these people, and not abstractions, was very attractive for its realism. This was the moment when the basic approaches of Marxism formed themselves. However, later on there occurred a controversial shift to another and more contentious one in Gellner's view: "...within the class of concrete activities, productive ones are more fundamental and decisive than coercive ones. (...) The shift from a stress on coercion and politics to the ultimate dominance of relations of production is incomparably more contentious." [ibid.: 177 and 178]

Despite the efforts of Marx, Engels and Lenin, in Gellner's view they never sufficiently clarified the relationship between economic and power institutions, between the economy and the state, both on the analytical level, and on the practical level. This deficiency then expressed itself in the more mature phases of socialist societies, and uncertainties in this regard signified for Marxism, as a theory oriented towards practical politics, one of the most serious problems.

Gellner felt that another serious deficiency in the Marxist view of history is the fact that it considered any social groups other than classes, defined in relation to the forces of production, as being of no fundamental importance in an account of historical change. By underestimating national communities as relatively independent social entities, and explaining conflicts between nations and nationalities as merely an expression of class conflict, Marxists were led towards fateful political difficulties and errors.

Two visions of society and thought

Towards the end of his life Gellner introduced a new element into his views, which had always given clear preference to rational individualism and an orientation towards instrumental rationality in the Weberian spirit. This is especially clear in the work his son David Gellner edited after his death, dealing with Wittgenstein and Malinowski.²⁰ According to Gellner there exist two basic models and at the same time contradictory philosophies of knowledge, in essence two basic theories of society and man. On the one hand there is atomistic individualism, and on the other romantic organicism [Gellner

²⁰) The book, *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* [Gellner 1998], which was published with a Foreword by Steven Lukes, is Gellner's assertion that philosophy is not an abstract observation of the world as it is, but rather it deals with the most important historical, social and also personal questions.

1998: 7-13]. In Central Europe the confrontation of these two principles is very intense and is well known in Tönnies' polarity of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. However, Gellner has his own version of atomistic individualism. He says: "...atomistic individualism, which sees the individual building his cognitive world (and indeed any other) by orderly, step-by-step, individual effort, possibly maintaining co-operative relationships with others similarly engaged, but without this fundamentally affecting the nature of the enterprise, which in the end is solitary." [Ibid.: 181] Gellner sums up by stating that the deepest principles of this individualism are self-sufficiency and atomism. If we discover truth as individuals, we err in groups.

Contrary to this is what he called romantic organicism, which considers society, or also any live tradition that transcends the individual, as the real social unit. One way or another, the only opportunity for fulfilment and creativity is found within this community. Each of these two visions has been expressed in various fields, not only in the sphere of knowledge. Each of them has, for example, its own conception of economic life, and political stances have also often been classified from the perspective of this polarity.

At the same time both visions represent a specific view of the nature of man and the nature of society. On the one hand, there is the Robinson Crusoe model – which enters society only on the basis of contract – and on the other hand there is the model of romantic holism. The latter stresses that man is a social animal, which without a community would not even have an identity of its own. Although in many respects Gellner agreed with the atomistic model, he was well aware of its problematic aspects: "Atomistic individualism is custom-corrosive and culture-corrosive. It facilitates the growth of knowledge, and of productive effectiveness, but it weakens the authority of cultures and makes the world less habitable, more cold and alien." [Ibid.: 5]

He then asks: how on earth are we to choose between these visions? It would indeed be a difficult or almost impossible task if we really had to make this choice. And here one of Gellner's new thoughts surfaces, one which in my view separates him from the Gellner of earlier years. He claims that we are not faced with this kind of choice in such a sharp form at all. Not only do we not have to decide, we are not even capable of making such decisions. But what is more important, our present-day situation is not as simple and sharply divided as it was in the past. Perhaps it was valid in, say, 1905, but today, luckily, it is not the case at all. But here is the most important point in his view of the structure of human history: "...happily, the world has changed. Our real situation and its options are somewhat different and more complex. Or rather, we have come to understand our world a little better than when its nature was disputed by two parties, each claiming a monopoly of truth for itself and, more significantly, tacitly united in supposing that there is no third option." [Ibid.: 182] Each of these great visions, as formed by their proponents, represents a rough sketch of our actual situation. Individualism, which we refer to as the tradition of Robinson Crusoe, began with Descartes, continued through Hume and Kant, and then was reformulated by 'secondary positivism' (Vienna) and contemporary neo-liberalism. It presents us with the story of how the wonderful and independent individual constructs his or her own cognitive, economic, and social world. Gellner commented dryly on this: "All this simply will not do either as an actual descriptive or as an explanatory account. This simply is not what actually happens, nor how it possibly could have happened." [Ibid.: 182] Both visions are sorts of Weberian ideal types or models.

The individualist model has no great aspirations of becoming a realistic portrait of society, or a detailed historical description of what happened in actual human history. It rather aims to be a sort of ethic of knowledge.

The crude deficiency of sociological realism found in atomistic individualism does not mean that it is an opinion without value or importance. It is its own kind of normative model of how a certain tradition creates its cognitive image of the world, of how it formulates its instructions on how to construct this world, and of how to successfully go about business and production. According to Gellner it is a kind of unwritten constitution of the 'republic of thought', and a description of how the way in which this constitution has been used completely changed the world. This normative function is actually its genuine role. It is not intended to be an adequate description of events that occurred, and it is not meant to be a piece of historical information. People have actually never been atoms, nor were they from the beginning of thought ever capable of breaking down the perceived world into its component parts. Some of them no doubt began as tamed members of their community who tended to always perceive things as units and forms. It was only when they discovered the individualist model of knowledge and they applied it to practical life, did a sharp growth in knowledge and the economy occur. Gellner is convinced that it is certain kinds of perception, thought, or action, or a 'new anthropology', that lie behind the emergence of capitalism and modernity. In this regard, Gellner's opinion at the end of the 1990s remained the same as when he wrote *Plough, Sword and Book*.

This very atomistic individualism for which in a cognitive and economic perspective he retained such sympathy is however only one of a number of possible traditions and cultures, and it is in no way a realistic description of what actually happened in history. But at the same time it is not just one of a number of traditions. It is unique and specific in the sense that it represents an immense cognitive and technological force. Other traditions may be strong in other areas, but in the two mentioned above, they are usually weaker than atomistic individualism.

After Gellner had again acknowledged his deep sympathy for these elements of the power of individualism, he made, in my view, an interesting turn in his last book, one that in his previous works had only been hinted at. In his view, this manner of individualist and rationalist thought and existence cannot develop and support some other and important aspects of the culture of human life, such as the sense of belonging to someone or something, the interconnection of the social and natural order, the emergence of obligation and co-operation, or simply escape through tragedy. In this area, the philosophy of individualism is basically weak and without value. Earlier Gellner wrote that this cognitive style does not answer our questions of 'What to do?' and 'How to live?'. But even here, at the end of this section of the book, he yet again emphasises the excellence and superiority of instrumental rationalism in the area of knowledge and the economy.

Conversely, the rival visions of romantic communalism claim that knowledge and practically everything else is always a sort of team game, so that the isolated individual is merely a strange or even pathological abstraction. In this connection Gellner mentions various forms of romanticism, but stresses, as would be expected of him, that this romanticism is merely a new confirmation of agrarian values, which in his view include aggressiveness, classification into status groups, uncritical loyalty to political and religious leaders, conduct inspired by precedents and feelings rather than reason, and all this occurs within the environment of a non-agrarian society, where these values have already lost

their original purpose. This new-age cult of *Gemeinschaft* became in his view attractive to those who were unable to live in the disenchanted world of individualism, and who began to hate this world and naively sought possibilities of escaping from it. What this philosophy offers, the escape from the cold and disenchanted world, was very attractive and impressive. One of its components was an element that gradually proved itself to be unusually dangerous. The emphasis on the unique value of each individual culture opened the doors to radical relativism. Again, Gellner comments laconically on this: "Relativism is an absurdity. It simply is not the case that all cognitive styles are equal." [Ibid.: 185]

However, Gellner agrees that the second vision has a better grasp of the nature of society. Society really is not a cluster of self-shaping individuals, entering into contractual relationships, but otherwise remaining in isolation. Life is experienced through sharing thoughts, concepts and values, which are not created by individuals – though here and there of course they do introduce important innovations. He stresses that only a shared culture can provide life with order and meaning. At the same time, however, he warns against the errors which this picture can cause, one of which is the enduring orientation towards a certain type of dangerous idealism, i.e. towards the idea that culture as a set of ideas shared by some community is the main or the only force guaranteeing social order and control. This idealism ignores the significance of physical and economic power in society. In this respect, Gellner of the 1990s had not abandoned the concept that he formulated for the Congress at Evian in 1966. At the same time, in his view this idealism is too egalitarian, in so far as individual cultures are concerned, and in this way it obscures the cognitive or technical dominance of some cultures. In addition, this opinion is dangerously narcissistic, it adores the idea that norms are always an internal part of cultures and thus rejects what is perhaps the most important reality in the history of humanity: transcendence. Truth is not cultural, but trans-cultural. In many areas people really can fail to transcend their culture, but this is not an essential weakness and it is not a necessary and inherent aspect of the human condition. Of course, it is this weakness that the romantics of organic immanence wanted us to believe in.

In his last book Gellner also expresses full agreement with Bronislaw Malinowski, who in his opinion managed to find the solution to what he referred to concisely as the Habsburg dilemma, that is, the vacillation between rationalistic and individualistic universalism, and romantic and historical relativism. He summarises his opinion on Malinowski's solution in roughly the following manner. As an anthropologist Malinowski was well aware that people live in communities and that their lives are shaped by these communities. The ideas, attitudes, and values that are maintained in the communities invest meaning into the lives of individuals, and it is possible to understand them properly only 'from within'. This is an old wisdom of the romantic tradition, which has always emphasised the uniqueness of each culture. However, Malinowski recognised one additional important point. Whenever an attempt is made to seriously examine the world, and to understand it, it is necessary to throw off any relativising viewpoints of individual cultures, and it is necessary to maintain a distance, or, if you will, to transcend the given culture. It is essential to penetrate the language, thoughts, and values of cultures in order to understand the real life of individuals in the society. However, this should not be used to help solve the questions of the validity of our knowledge. The validity, and therefore the truthfulness of our knowledge cannot depend upon the uniqueness of individual cultures. And this is an idea that Gellner also backed fully.

Problems

A sociological and historical imagination such as Gellner's, which deals with subjects as numerous and broad as he did, exposes itself to the danger of strong attacks. His daring for such an untraditional and, in the view of a number of critics, simplifying formulation of the structure of human history called blatantly for this kind of reaction. If we leave aside the criticisms aimed at details and less serious points, we find that there are still several objections to his philosophy of history that merit some serious reflection.

First, there is a hidden tension between his functionally structural methodology, which he received from Malinowski, and his philosophical tendency towards ontological and social atomism. It would be possible to cite many examples in his work wherein he assumes the existence of relatively strong bonds between the two categories of social phenomena, e.g. between economic growth and the existence of robust science. Very often his arguments have the character of proof of structural dependencies, and some of his claims seem as though they have come straight from Comte's concept of consensus. Opposed to this is his frequent emphasis on the role of chance, the uniqueness of the constellations of economic and political circumstances, the multiplicity of particular forms of society, e.g. agrarian, and the individualism of modern societies. His methodological functionalism and structuralism collides with his image of societies created through freely linked elements and structures that do not create solid systems; I would call this 'slackened structuralism'. This also led him to a rejection of linearity in the concept of human history, and he undoubtedly would have accepted the concept of so-called multiple modernities. I remember well a conversation with Gellner on Norbert Elias, in which despite all his admiration for Elias he declared that the great problem with the theory of the process of civilisation was Elias' linear evolutionism.

The second problem area is Gellner's division of the structure of society into three blocks – 'production' (economy), 'government' (politics), and 'knowledge'. It is possible here to raise the objection that his social statics lack a fourth element. This could be described as the set of mechanisms that are directed at preserving and maintaining the basic values and rules for regulating mutual relationships between individuals, groups and institutions. It is the component in society that fulfils the function of a stabiliser, the keeper of the existing order in its manifold forms (custom, morals, ethics, law, etc.). Anyone who reads Gellner's works must notice that he has never paid as much attention to this component of the structure of society as he has to that which he referred to as 'knowledge', 'cognitive styles', 'science' etc. It is rather likely that he would say that the function of stabiliser is fulfilled by the component of society that he called 'knowledge'.

That he did not set facts and values against each other, nor deal with their mutual relationships in the least, testifies to this point. He did not therefore consider it important to devote himself to relationships between factual and normative judgements, and equally he did not deal with the question of the possibility of objectivity in the social sciences, like Max Weber. However, he no doubt observed the dilemmas that Weber attempted to solve in his essay 'Science as a Vocation'. Yet it is clear that alongside Weber he was also fully aware that 'what should be' cannot be derived from knowledge of 'what is'. Despite his post-Enlightenment rationalism, which is how he referred to the base of his deepest thought, he stated that: "Reason simply is not capable of providing the premises which could select or establish either our aims or our means. (...) In a world dominated by an effective science and technology, and a highly variable and manipulable society

and humanity, we simply lack sufficient premises for long-term decisions. (...) Our past constraints had limited our options, and our superstitions endowed our constrained options with the illusion of legitimacy. (...) Our new powers leave us free-floating. We may find ourselves in a kind of premises-less vacuum, with too much power to create, and no reasons for choice concerning what we create.” [Gellner 1992: 181] Weber was also fully aware of this situation, and as Karl Jaspers pointed out,²¹ he was inclined towards an existentialist solution: in the situation of ‘a premise-less vacuum’ our actions are primarily the result of a choice. We make a decision and act according to it, and through it we create a new social and cultural reality. A rationalistic interpretation of knowledge, knowledge in Gellner’s interpretation, cannot explain the content and direction of these choices. However, in a novel way it points to the dilemmas of the liberal concept of historical development, understood as the progression from a stiff, regulated social organisation to a ‘free’ one, to a ‘premise-less vacuum’. What has been unambiguously considered as a development towards greater individual freedom can in his view conceal the risk of a thus far unknown state, which he referred to as ‘free floating’.

The third area of problems with Gellner’s structure of human history concerns his three phases of development of human society. The immensely long period of agrarian society is understood as one basic and homogeneous phase. Social and economic historians have always considered this to be an exaggerated simplification, and this is true for both the generalisation based on European history alone, and the generalisation based on the development of other civilisations. The theory of the Malthusian nature of all agrarian societies would also require more meticulous verification. Generally it is possible to state that in comparison with the analysis of industrial societies, Gellner’s analysis of agraria did not show enough respect for the rich variability of this developmental phase. Internally it was more heterogeneous, and it was also not so static, i.e. lacking any technological or economic progress, as Gellner suggested. Also, the transition from agraria to an industrial society was probably not as sharp as Gellner assumed. Between both phases there were many overlappings. It is likely that a number of Gellner’s generalisations and their concrete forms stemmed from his view that was based primarily on the history of Europe. His deep interest in Islam and his continual comparisons between European development and the development of Muslim societies was not a sufficient substitute for a comparison of Europe with China or India.

The fourth problem area is Gellner’s attempt to define contemporary Western society as industrial. He perceived the new information and communication technology as being a part of industrial society. In a few of his reflections on what could divide industrial society from a post-industrial society he stated that this would be the application of science not only to the manipulation of natural elements but also to the manipulation of human qualities. Gellner’s post-industrial society is strikingly similar to Huxley’s *Brave New World*, but it is impossible to fully agree with this definition of industrial and post-industrial society.

Finally, the last group of problems concerns those related to the fact that Gellner bound the fate of open, liberal and even civil societies too tightly to industrial society and to the concept of modernisation and modernism. I think that this kind of close connection

²¹) The existentialist features of Weber’s thought were pointed out by Karl Jaspers in his paper ‘Deutsches Wesen im politischen Denken’ in 1932 [Jaspers 1932].

can pose a threat to the concept of an open and liberal society. The end of modernism would then also have to lead to the end of the open society. Some of Gellner's thoughts suggested that he feared this kind of development. Unlike Anthony Giddens or Ulrich Beck, he did not take into consideration the possibility of a 'second modernism', and instead worried about the danger of new types of authoritative and non-liberal regimes. In his opinion these could emerge due to many factors, for example as a consequence of introducing necessary regulation on the use of natural resources (he sometimes referred to this type of scenario with the term 'ecological dictatorships'), or owing to a strengthening of the manipulative role of the mass media, or as a result of an increase in terrorism and international organised crime, as he presciently predicted in some of his statements.

Gellner was fundamentally tied to the first modernism, and despite all its problems he remained its protagonist and defended it. He understood it like few others did, and only few saw as clearly as he did its deep contradictions and dilemmas. Yet he accepted it, and in essence supported it. He never of course had the feeling that it was absolutely secure, and was ever painfully aware that it could indeed vanish.

Translated by Robin Cassling

JIRÍ MUSIL is Professor of the Central European University, Budapest and Warsaw and of Charles University, Prague. His main areas of study are urban and regional studies, and political sociology. He has published several books on urban problems, housing sociology, urbanisation and on social ecology. His last book written in English was *The End of Czechoslovakia*. At present he is concentrating on the political changes and problems of Czech society and identity. He is the President of the European Sociological Association..

References

- Gellner, E. 1959. *Words and Things*. London: Gollancz.
- Gellner, E. 1964. *Thought and Change*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Gellner, E. 1973. *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Gellner, E. 1974. *Legitimation of Belief*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gellner, E. 1988. *State and Society in Soviet Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gellner, E. 1991 (1988). *Plough, Sword and Book. The Structure of Human History*. London: Paladin.
- Gellner, E. 1992. *Reason and Culture. The Historic Role of Rationality and Rationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gellner, E. 1996. "A Response to Critics." Pp. 623-686 in *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, ed. by J. A. Hall and I. Jarvie. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Gellner, E. 1997. *Nationalism*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Gellner, E. 1998. *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, J. A., I. Jarvie (eds.) 1996. *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Jaspers, K. 1932. "Max Weber. Deutsches Wesen im politischen Denken." In *Forschen und Philosophieren*, hrsg. von G. Stalling. Oldenburg.
- MacFarlane, A. 1978. *The Origins of English Individualism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- MacFarlane, A. 1996. "Ernest Gellner and the Escape to Modernity." Pp. 207-219 in *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, ed. by J. A. Hall and I. Jarvie. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Lukes, S. 1998. "Foreword." Pp. XIII-XIX in *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*, by E. Gellner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Park, A. 1996. "Gellner and the Long Trends of History." Pp. 573-584 in *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, ed. by J. A. Hall and I. Jarvie. Amsterdam: Rodopi.